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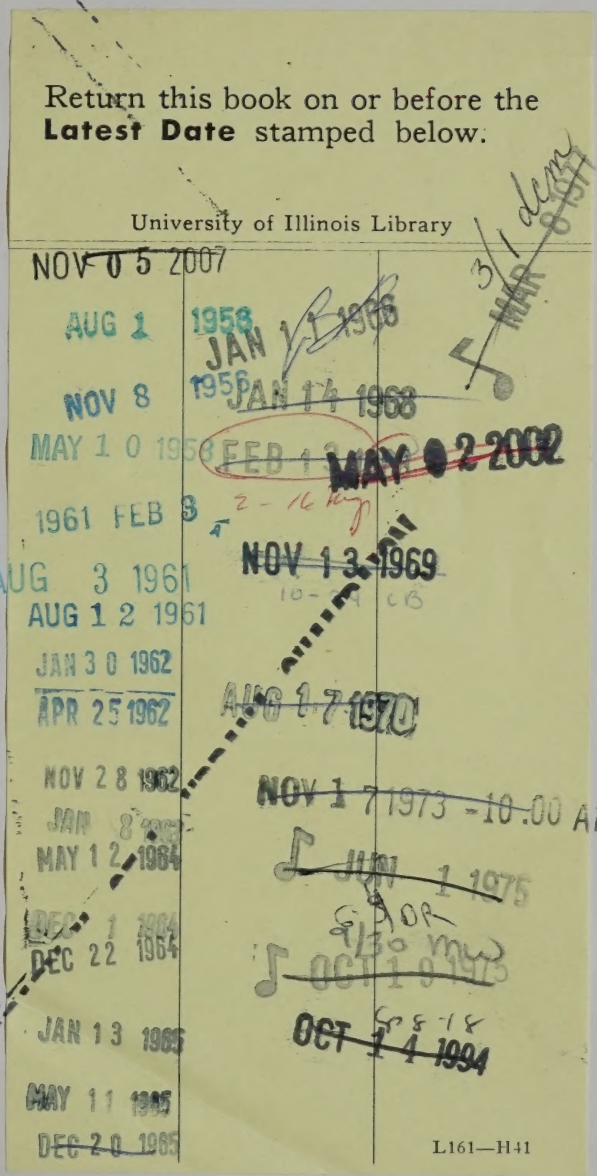
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MUSIC OF THE WEST AND THE CLASSICAL MUSIC OF INDIA : A STUDY IN VALUES

JOHN M. KUYPERS

AT NO TIME in the history of Western society has there been as much music generally available as now. No one needs to go without music of some kind, and for most of us there is a great variety from which to choose. Actually the matter of choice has become a problem, particularly for performers and teachers who are often called upon to explain why they choose one type of music rather than another. Sooner or later such explanations involve a consideration of values, and those of us who have been forced to deal with the problem discover that it seems impossible to find values in music on which intelligent people can agree.

The problem of values is basically a philosophic and not a scientific problem, and for that reason it presents to the Western mind a peculiar difficulty. We have become so impressed by the almost miraculous success of the empirical method as it is employed in the natural sciences that we have lost faith in any other method of arriving at truth. We have become afraid to voice opinions, to posit conclusions, to have convictions, unless they can be supported by evidence of the kind that can be measured and counted. Problems which cannot be broken down for examination by this method and which do not lend themselves to empirical analyses have, therefore, suffered neglect.

This was not always so. It is precisely in matters of value or meaning that ancient thinkers had wisdom which we seem to have lost. In part they were scientists, that is, they used observation and reason, but they were poets as well. Socrates, Confucius, Lao-tze, the Buddha, and Jesus, did not have the material facts that are at our disposal, but their wisdom about what might be called matters of the soul far surpassed ours. As a matter of fact, we still live by much of this wisdom, all of which was obtained without the benefit of scientific research.

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It is not surprising, therefore, that ancient thinkers and philosophers, with the exception of Jesus, should have been interested in musical values, because, being very much concerned with the soul of man, they were also concerned with the effects of music on man's character. The Chinese, the Persians, the Greeks, the Romans, and especially the Indians, wrote at length on the subject. They believed that the use of certain kinds of music was conducive to the welfare of the individual and the nation, and that other kinds of music had a contrary effect. To the Indians, music was one of the most potent tools for conditioning the soul, for the attainment of spiritual enlightenment, and for making one susceptible to divine influence. Brahma, and Siva were among the first musicians, and are often pictured in Indian art with musical instruments as is Apollo with the lyre.

We know little about the way music actually sounded in ancient times. So far as we know, however, none of this music, or even the music of Western society up to four or five centuries ago, compares to our music in variety of expression, richness of harmony, complicated structure, and elaborate mixture of tone colour. Ancient architecture, painting, sculpture, and literature still arouse our admiration ; but the instruments of the ancients that we see in our museums seem primitive and crude beside those we employ today, and what we know of the music of ancient India, China, and Greece leads us to believe that it was quite unpretentious in comparison with, for example, our great symphonies and operas. When therefore, Plato says that the use of the wrong modes could lead to the downfall of the state, when Confucius claims that the misuse of tones brings about "general discord" and indicates that "the nation will not have long to live," when the Indian sages tell us about the beneficial effects of the use of certain modes at different times of the day and certain seasons of the year and the ill effects of the

wrong use of these modes, we are inclined to assume that these comments are abstract speculations which have no connection with living music either in the past or in the present. But unless we are willing to go so far as to accuse the greatest thinkers of high civilizations of having independently devised merely arbitrary and fanciful pronouncements about music, we can only conclude that the ancients perceived in music, or at least in *their* music, something that we fail to perceive.

Without being able to hear the music on which they based their observations, it is difficult for us to know what their music revealed to them. It is significant, however, that in their comments on music the philosophers of antiquity were very much concerned with the ordering of the tones of the modes on which their music was based. This brings us to an important difference between the music of antiquity and ours. In ancient music, particularly that of India, a large number of different modes were employed, and in the use of these modes it was possible to produce tones so that their true harmonic relationships could be observed. In our music, on the other hand, only a few modes are used, and in our musical practices, the harmonic relationship of their tones is obscured and in many instances distorted. Our music, therefore, conspicuously neglects the element which the ancients held to be most valuable, the exact relationships of musical tones.

This may well account for the fact that we fail to perceive subtleties in the meaning of tonal relationships that were perfectly clear to the ancients, and it may also explain why Western musicians, having lost an ear for subtle harmonic values, often claim that there can be no meaning in the tonal relationships of different modes other than the meaning that has been accidentally and fortuitously associated with these modes. Since this is a crucial point in our discussion, a brief explanation of what is meant by harmonic relationships and their distortion is necessary.

II

Within our range of hearing, an infinite number of tones of different pitch are available for musical use. The fundamental problem in making any kind of music consists in the selection of a certain number of these tones. This can be done in many different ways, and any arbitrary selection of tones will lend itself to the making of some kind of music. Nevertheless, no advanced system of music is possible unless it takes cognizance of the fact that different tones, when produced simultaneously, have a greater or lesser capacity to fuse or to blend. The degree to which they will fuse or blend determines their harmonic relationships, which we designate by the terms consonance and dissonance. It is these relationships that the ancient writers held to be so important. The exact harmonic relationships of the tones of the various modes, they thought, determined the character, the "ethos", of the modes, and this, in turn, determined the effect of the music of the different modes on the character or the soul of man. We, on the other hand, give these relationships secondary consideration.

It so happens that our minds will accept certain tonal relationships as consonant even if they are slightly distorted. Because this is so, we adopted, about two centuries ago, a system of tuning keyboard instruments that slightly distorts all harmonic relationships except those of the octave. This is the "well-tempered" system of tuning by which the octave is divided into twelve "equal" steps. The distortion was held to be a mild evil which brought certain advantages by way of extending the range of our system of harmony. Originally this kind of tuning was meant to affect only music performed on keyboard instruments, and the resulting distortions were thought to influence musical structure itself mainly during transitions between undistorted harmonic relationships. In time, however, situations involving these questionable relationships began to be more widely used, until

today much musical theory is based entirely on such harmonic distortions.

Unfortunately, even in music which is supposedly based on undistorted harmonic relationships, we seldom hear them, because many of our musical practices are not conducive to tonal clarity. The piano has a thick tone and, as we have already noted, it is always mistuned. Our stringed instruments are played with *vibrato* which disturbs accurate pitch. We prefer the full-bodied sounds of large bands, orchestras, and choruses to the clarity of tone of the smaller ensembles. Good tone for us in any medium of musical expression is a rich, voluptuous, vibrant tone, and nearly all the changes in our musical instruments and in the use of the human voice during the last few centuries have been directed toward the production of a full and rich tone which tends to obscure pitch clarity. Moreover, in addition to being based on actual out-of-tune harmonic relationships, much of our music is structurally incredibly complex and very difficult to perform, leaving little room for the consideration of precise tonal relationships.

All of these factors make for a music that can at times be highly stimulating to the emotions, extremely appealing to the senses, and dazzling to the intellect, but we may have gained these qualities at the expense of harmonic values which are to be found in a simpler kind of music. If, as the ancients thought, there is a connection between harmonic values and the effect of music on man and society, we are blinding ourselves to such effects. This may explain why it is that we know a great deal about the pleasures of music, but very little about its spiritual value.

Several noted Western composers and theorists have expressed dissatisfaction with our out-of-tune musical system. Its basic tonal assumptions, however, are frozen into our musical theory, our instruments, our systems of teaching, our performing habits,

and even our listening habits. None of these can be changed radically without major upheavals. Superficial changes in the practices that are most detrimental in the production of true harmonic relationships can be made, and they have been made in the recent past, notably by Igor Stravinsky. But so long as he stays within our tonal system, even Stravinsky cannot solve the problem. Within our system of twelve tones there seem to be only two choices : either to go forward toward ever greater complications in structure and colour, as Stravinsky did in his earlier compositions, or toward ever greater dissonance, as Schönberg did, or to go backward to a simpler style of writing that was adequate for the classical period but perhaps not for us. This Stravinsky has done in his later works, hence his neo-classicism.

III

Some highly interesting experiments with new tonal systems and new ways of writing, however, are being carried on by a small group of adventurous composers such as Harry Partch, Lou Harrison, John Cage, and Allan Hovhaness. It is significant that their work is receiving impetus and direction by the nascent interest of the Western world in the philosophy and the arts of the East, particularly of India. Some of these composers are being influenced by Eastern thought, and, in spite of the fact that their styles of composing are very different, their compositions at times have a marked Oriental quality. Perhaps the Orient, particularly India, whose classical music is based on an ancient tradition, will point the way to a new kind of music based on true harmonic relationships.

In 1912 Ananda Coomaraswamy said that some artists in India were performing in the classical tradition but that they "belong to an order that is passing away" ; and he expressed the fear that the use of the tempered harmonium and other Western

influences would contribute greatly to the obliteration of the classical tradition of Indian music. This was before the day of recording devices ; whatever is left of music in the classical Indian tradition is now being preserved. We cannot say with certainty to what extent this music is identical with that of ancient India, but it is conceived in a way quite different from ours and it is based on the same theoretical framework as the music of ancient times. We can assume, therefore, that this music is much closer to the spirit of ancient India, and perhaps ancient Greece, than any other music that exists today. An understanding of this music may lead to a rediscovery of those spiritual values in music of which the ancient philosophers were aware, but which we seem to have lost.

An examination of the best available Indian music of the classical tradition shows us that the Indian musician has a much greater choice of tones than we have, and that he has more respect for their harmonic relationships than we have for ours. In our system, as we have seen, we have, during the last few centuries, made more and more use of a scale composed of twelve equi-distant tones whose positions are fixed in an out-of-tune relationship. Our system is in the main a closed system. By contrast the Indian system is open. Theorists claim that in Indian music the octave is divided into twenty-two tones. This claim is misleading. In practice the Indian performer never refers to a fixed scale ; instead he selects the tones used in a particular piece of music from the infinite number of tones available within the octave. A particular piece of music is usually based on different tones ranging from five to seven. This arrangement or combination of tones is called a *rāga*. Rāgas are somewhat like our major and minor modes, but whereas we have come to depend largely on these two modes, the major and the minor, a good Indian performer will utilise quite a large number of *rāgas*. Through harmony and modulation,

our few modes are used with more variety and colour than is used in any particular *rāga*, but the large number of *rāgas*, with the accurate harmonic relationships of their tones, gives the Indian system an advantage in melodic variety and sensitivity. The most important difference, however, between the two systems is this : we use only a few modes selected from a comparatively closed system of twelve tones ; the Indian uses many modes selected from an infinite number of tones.

It can readily be seen that two systems that differ so greatly will produce a music that is strikingly different. This difference consists mainly in the harmonic relationship of the tones. In our music, as we have seen, it is neglected ; in Indian music it is the most important factor. The Indian musician uses no fixed pitch instrument like our piano ; he selects the *rāga* tones from infinity by ear, and *must*, therefore, pay attention first to their harmonic relationships. Moreover, the Indian believes that the essential meaning of the music lies precisely in the harmonic relationships of the *rāga* tones, not so much to each other as to a single tone, a drone, which is sounded throughout a composition. Every *rāga* tone is heard and measured against this drone tone which functions as a stable harmonic foundation, or yardstick, for the *rāga* tone. The significance of the music does not lie, as is the case with Western music, principally in a succession of musical tones but rather in the harmonic relationship of the *rāga* tone and the drone tone at each moment in a musical performance.

Indian classical music is interwoven with religious beliefs, particularly those of yoga. It is the aim of the yogi to attain self-awareness and identification with the divine, the Absolute within the self, the Atman, which is a manifestation of Brahman. That the yogi in order to obtain this goal must completely withdraw himself from reality is a Western misconception of yoga. The yogi would say that only through self-awareness can he obtain an understanding of everything outside the self. This

understanding does not necessarily lead to a withdrawal from the objects of the mind, the emotions and the senses, the world of *māyā* ; it leads, rather, to a non-attachment to these objects, with which the yogi can then often deal very effectively precisely because he is not attached to them. In Indian music the drone may be said to symbolize the self, or rather the Atman; and the *rāgas*, with their infinite variations, everything outside the self. "We have here," says Coomaraswamy, "the sound of the tambura [producing the drone] which is heard before the song, during the song, and continues after it : that is the timeless Absolute, which as it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be. On the other hand there is the song itself [the *rāga*] which is the variety of Nature, emerging from its source and returning at the close of its cycle. The harmony of that undivided Ground with this intricate Pattern is the unity of Spirit and Matter." A musical performance in the classical tradition is therefore a subjective, individual, spiritual act in which, through the continuous sounding of the drone, self-awareness is attained, and in which, through the *rāga* tones, the relation between the self and things outside the self is understood and brought into harmony. Classical Indian music calms the mind, the emotions and the senses, which leads to spiritual awareness. As Fox-Strangways says in his comments on the best in Indian music, it "...reveals man in the presence of God."

The Indian would probably say that our music, whatever its merits may be, is not music that leads to non-attachment from *māyā*, and while it may not hinder spiritual enlightenment, it is not likely to lead to it. Certainly even in most music used by us for religious worship, except that written in the pre-Renaissance tradition, we expect the emotions to be aroused and the senses to be stimulated. But to quote Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan : "Ecstacy or emotional excitement is not the goal of religious striving." We may not agree with him, but his statement points

to a marked difference between the music of the West and that of the ancient East. We are not prone to think of our music as leading to self-awareness, we think that it is the purpose of music to lead to self-expression, which is not the same thing. A profound musical experience to us is one in which we *lose* ourselves, we might even say *escape* from ourselves, an indication that rather than attaining self-awareness through music we want to lose it.

Even though classical Indian music is in a true sense religious music, it does not mean that it is austere and without joy. The Indian does not equate religion with austerity or gladness with sin, nor is he afraid to gratify the senses. He knows, however that the pursuit of sense pleasure as an end in itself is futile and leads to satiety. Pleasure of the senses is only good as a step to spiritual health in the same way that the gratification of our appetite for food is good only as a step in attaining bodily health.

In classical Indian music the capacities of the sense and the emotions are brought into full play, and while the music of the *rāgas* is of a profound and serious character, it is balanced by that of the *rāgīnīs*, a simpler sort of *rāga*. Ajitkumar Sinha, the Indian philosopher, expresses this balance in a unique way. "The *rāginīs* are considered the female counterpart of the *rāgas*. They are simpler in structure and fast moving. They represent the lighter aspect of our personality. The *rāgas* are generally transcendental and transempirical in nature, whereas the *rāgīnīs* are expressive of our momentary moods and feelings. *Rāga* without *rāgīnī* would be like male without his female partner, reason without feeling, seriousness without frolic; the one shines out prominently due to the contrast effect of the other."

Altogether Indian classical music with its vast number of *rāgas* and *rāgīnīs* comprises a body of music which is far from meagre. Nevertheless, in spirit, it is very different from Western music. This difference has been described tellingly by Rabindranath

Tagore : "For us, Hindu music has above all a transcendental significance. It disengages the spiritual from the happenings of life ; it sings of the relationship of the human soul with the soul of things beyond. The world by day is like European music ; a flowing concourse of vast harmony composed of concord and discord and many disconnected fragments. And the night world is our Indian music ; one pure, deep and tender *rāga*. They both stir us, yet the two are contradictory in spirit. But this cannot be helped. At the very root nature is divided into two, day and night, unity and variety, finite and infinite. We people of India live in the realm of night : we are overpowered by the sense of one and the infinite. Our music draws the listener away beyond the realm of everyday joys and sorrows, and takes us to that lonely region of renunciation which lies at the root of the universe, while European music leads us a variegated dance through the endless rise and fall of human grief and joy."

The classical music of India unquestionably has an element that our music lacks, but, on the other hand, our music has a great deal that is not to be found in the music of India, classical or otherwise. Perhaps the two are, as Tagore suggests, contradictory, but they may not be irreconcilable. Within the span of twenty-four hours there is both day and night ; in a complete life cycle there needs to be experience of both the infinite and the finite. Are the two mutually exclusive ? Perhaps our music with its sensuous attractiveness, its emotional range, its nervous energy, is the music for youth, for group participation and public display. The music of classical India, with its meditative, contemplative qualities that rise above the pleasure of the senses and the emotions and that "...reveals man in the presence of God," may be more appropriate as a private discipline later in life. The Indians can find in our music and in our impressive techniques for mass dissemination of music much that will enrich their lives and add to their joy of living. The individual

in our society, in his turn, after having submerged himself in the "everyday joys and sorrows" of our music, might find in music like that of classical India a spiritual quality to give value and meaning to these experiences.

The problem of combining the best in Western and Eastern musical practices, however, goes beyond the music itself. Music and musicians are part of their society. Until the fundamental differences in point of view which separate the East from the West can be understood and reconciled, efforts to combine the best in the music of each may be accepted only as interesting experiments. Coomaraswamy once said that Indian music, both that which has been lost and that which remains, is "the most complete expression of the soul or genius of the Indian—a mirror faithfully expressing their inner life." If, through a study of Indian music, we of the West could be helped to understand the Indian way of life and to synthesize this with our own, we might produce a society that would be superior to those we have so far separately produced.

To many thoughtful men this seems a desirable aim. F. S. C. Northrup, in his stimulating book, *The Meeting of East and West*, says : "...it should eventually be possible to achieve a society for mankind generally in which the higher standard of living of the most scientifically advanced theoretically guided Western nations is combined with the compassion, the universal sensitivity to the beautiful, and the abiding equanimity and calm joy of spirit which characterizes the sages and many of the humblest people of the Orient."

A synthesis of the two, however, will not be easy to achieve and might lead to a product inferior to either one separately. We cannot know the East merely by learning to stand on our heads or to cross our legs, by wearing sandals or wrapping ourselves in bedsheets while singing sentimental songs or by dancing on top of a mountain. We of the West, weary with the complexity

of modern living, are sometimes prone to look for escape in exotic and what appear to be simpler creeds. The Indian, on the other hand, is not going to understand the West just by throwing away his dhoti and his sitār, by wearing Western clothes, or by buying a well-tempered harmonium or piano, to say nothing of a deep-freeze unit and and an automobile. Many Indians today, in their anxiety to become Westernized, know little about their own great tradition in philosophy, music and art ; we of the West have often brought to India only the superficial benefits of our society and these actually have sometimes debased Indian culture. Not only in our scientific and technological skills, but in our democratic heritage, there is much that can profit the East, and in their philosophic, religious, and artistic heritage there is much that can profit us. World events are forcing us into contact with each other. This contact could well lead to conflict. A superior syncretism of the West and East will require of each a profound knowledge and understanding of its own heritage, coupled with a knowledge and respect for the values in the culture of the other.

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